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So Far From Victory

As the nation reaches the end of Speaker Newt Gingrich's first hundred days (face it: that's what they are), Democrats are feeling pretty good about themselves. The Republicans have been put on the defensive in many areas—notably for messing around with the school lunch program and for a tax cut plan that Democrats have painted as a boon to the rich and a threat to the budget.

The GOP, moreover, failed to pass either the balanced budget amendment or term limits, the two parts of their program deemed to have the most "populist" appeal. The party did not get much traction out of another issue deemed to be broadly popular, welfare reform, and even looked mean in the act of passing it. And the Republicans have revealed their divisions on matters ranging from abortion to the deficit.

Not a bad hundred days' work, say the Democrats, and it's true that President Clinton and his party in Congress adjusted to opposition better than anyone might have expected. But Democrats should drop the self-congratulation and keep the champagne on ice. In Cold War terms, they have pursued a policy of "containment," preventing the Republicans from gaining even more ground than they picked up last fall. It's a long way from containment to victory.

What's most striking about these hundred days is not that Gingrich & Co. have dominated the news. That, in any event, is a mixed blessing, since Clinton does better the more the spotlight moves away from him and toward the speaker. More important is the fact that conservative and Republican arguments now dominate the debate. Democrats fight on the edges to preserve certain programs. Republicans get their big ideas in play every day: the need to reduce the size of government, to hem in the regulatory apparatus, to let families keep more of their own income.

Two recent episodes reveal how well the Republicans are doing. On a trip to Florida, the president told state legislators that they needed to pay attention to the "fine print" in the Republican welfare plan. The danger, Clinton said, was that the Republicans could put state governments in a deep hole by slashing federal aid to the poor. Clinton's criticisms of the Republican welfare plan were well taken. But political debates are rarely won on the basis of "fine print." The real battle here is over what the federal government's responsibilities toward the poor should be, and Democrats are not convinced that they can win that larger fight.

The president also announced last week that because of the work of his reinventing government team, he had found ways of saving \$13 billion "without a mean spirit or a meat ax." Here again, Clinton's initiative was fine as far as it went. But he cast it in a way that put him in competition with the Republicans on their own turf. He was saying: Whatever they can cut, I can cut better.

In 1992, Clinton laid the groundwork for a much broader argument. Clinton's campaign was based on the idea that during a time of enormous economic transition, government could intervene in ways that would improve the overall economy and enhance the opportunities enjoyed by individuals. He said that government programs (whether in education, welfare or job training) needed to reflect the country's basic values—notably the importance of work and personal initiative. He also said it was possible to "reinvent" government to make it work better. But at bottom, his message was not at all anti-government; it was, on the contrary, a promise of extremely active, albeit "reinvented," government.

If your message is that government can work, you'd better make it work. The Democrats' problem, in 1994 and now, is that they didn't do that. The Clinton administration's practical problems—whether in how it handled appointments, how it dealt initially with the Whitewater accusations or, more generally, how it made the White House look like something other than a smoothly running machine—undermined confidence that the government (or at least *this* government) had the competence to keep the big promises Clinton made. The Democratic Congress, in the meantime, failed to enact reforms in areas such as health care, job training and welfare. It thereby booted the chance to show it could get its own act together and to demonstrate that government could act boldly to deal with new economic times.

With the Republicans in control of Congress, there are limits on what the Democrats can accomplish to undo this damage. As a first step, Democrats are defending parts of government that are popular in the hope of chipping away at the Republicans' claim that government does little that is worthwhile. The Clinton administration is pursuing the same course, while also trying hard to project a more competent image than it did in its first two years.

Those steps are necessary but not sufficient. Gingrich knows what he is doing in highlighting a "Contract," which is cast in contrast to the sense that Democrats broke their own promises, and in filling that Contract with declarations that life would be better if government would only recede. Democrats can gain points in the polls by sniping at Gingrich around the margins. But they will ultimately have to challenge his argument at its core. That means persuading people that government cannot only deliver hot lunches in schools but also be a dynamic force for reform and general economic betterment. That may be a hard sell right now. But it is, in the end, what the Democrats are selling.